

# The Devon Origins of John Pullman

*Patty McGregor*

Tracing John Pullman to his place of English origin was like fitting a square nail in a round hole. This is a task a blacksmith could accomplish easily. Using heat, a hammer and an anvil, he would simply soften the troublesome nail and reshape it. Fire and force are unsuitable tools for a genealogist faced with conflicting evidence. Contrary facts cannot be melted and hammered to fit; they must instead be resolved with diligent research and careful analysis. Nonetheless, as this unique case study demonstrates, a little attention to the ancient craft of blacksmithing sometimes doesn't hurt.

Family tradition offered few clues about the origins of John Pullman. All that was known of his early years was that he was born in Devonshire, England and had come to Canada as a single young man. When research on him began in earnest in the mid nineties, the starting point was the 1871 Ontario census index to heads of households and strays. The most promising index entry was followed up by consulting the full microfilmed record. This showed that in 1871 John Pullman was a lodger, boarding with a family in Toronto's east end.<sup>1</sup> His future wife, Mary Ann Beamish, was enumerated in the same household. The family with which they were living is believed to have been related to Mary Ann.

Tracking John through subsequent census returns built a steadily more detailed picture of his family in Canada. By 1881 he and Mary Ann were married with two children, eight-year-old George and three-year-old Charlotte.<sup>2</sup> Sarah, born a surprising 18 years after her next oldest sibling, did not appear with the family until 1901. John's place of birth was all but once given as England but his age varied from one census to the next, making it difficult to determine a probable year of birth. Both the 1901 census<sup>3</sup> and his 1905 death registration<sup>4</sup> gave his age as 60 years. Cemetery records for St. James Cemetery in Toronto, where John was buried on 20 January 1905, also give his age as

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<sup>1</sup>John Pullman, boarder, 1871 census, St. David's Ward, Toronto East, district 47, subdistrict C-2, p. 44, line 16; LAC microfilm C-9972.

<sup>2</sup>John Pullman household, 1881 census, St. Lawrence Ward, Toronto, district 134, subdistrict A-2, p. 50, household 262; LAC microfilm C-13245.

<sup>3</sup>John Pullman household, 1901 census, Ward 1, Toronto East, district 117, subdistrict A-4, p. 12, line 39; LAC microfilm T-6498.

<sup>4</sup>John Pullman death, Ontario death registration 001235 (1905); FHL microfilm 1854287.

60 years.<sup>5</sup> His grave is not marked by a headstone.

Taken together, census returns placed John's birth in England between 1840 and 1845 (see chart). This time frame falls after the requirement for civil registration of births that began in Britain in 1837. A search of the index to these records found several John Pullman births in Devon between 1840 and 1845. However, without the names of his parents there was no way to determine if any were the right John.

SOURCE	AGE GIVEN	BIRTH YEAR
Death registration (1905)	60	1844 or 1845
1901 census	60	4 January 1841
1891 census <sup>6</sup>	50	1840 or 1841
1881 census	37	1843 or 1844
1871 census	28	1842 or 1843

The next step was to find a marriage record for John and Mary Ann. The marriage most likely occurred after the 1871 census, at which time John and Mary Ann were both unmarried, and before the birth of their first child in 1873. The entry that was eventually located under the misspelling Pulman confirmed some information and provided additional clues. The marriage took place in Toronto on 22 January 1872, at which time John, a labourer, indicated he was 27 years old and had been born in Devonshire, the son of William and Ann Pulman.<sup>7</sup> Between the 1871 census and his marriage in 1872, John had lost a year in age.

Now armed with parents' names, a search of the 1851 British census was undertaken for a John Pullman between six and 10 years of age living with his parents, William and Ann, somewhere in Devon. Devon was one of the first counties to have the 1851 census transcribed and indexed. A search of the CD on which the material was published identified three John Pullman/Pulman

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<sup>5</sup>Letter from St. James Cemetery to Paul Woodrow, 1 November 1994, regarding interment records, plot 113, Section F.

<sup>6</sup>John Pullman household, 1891 census, Toronto East, district 119, subdistrict F-4, p. 50, line 3; LAC microfilm T-6371.

<sup>7</sup>John Pulman-Mary Ann Beamish, Ontario marriage registration, vol. 28, p. 118; FHL microfilm 1862698.

candidates born between 1840 and 1845.<sup>8</sup>

NAME	AGE	BIRTHPLACE	PARENTS	PLACE of ENUMERATION
John Pullman	9	Heavitree	John & Ann	St. Mary Steps, Exeter
John T. Pullman	7	Morchard Bishop	Robert & Ann	Morchard Bishop
John Pulman	10	Berum	John & Mary	Ottery St. Mary

With none of these candidates having parents named William and Ann, research reached an impasse. A re-evaluation of work done to this point seemed in order. This review produced the following list of known facts:

- John was probably born in Devon sometime between 1840 and 1845.
- According to the 1901 census, he arrived in Canada in 1865.
- His occupation in the censuses was maltster, labourer and merchant.
- He married Mary Ann Beamish in Toronto in 1872.
- He and his wife spent their married life in the east end of Toronto.
- He died 19 January 1905 and was buried in St. James Cemetery.

What other Ontario records might prove useful? Wills, obituaries, land records and city directories came to mind. No record of a will and no letters of administration were found. It seems John was one of the working poor and, other than the usual life events, left few records. He is not known to have owned property and there was no death notice in the Toronto newspapers. That left city directories.

A search of city directories covering all the years John was known to have lived in Toronto found several different addresses for the family, always in the same part of the city's east end, as follows:

YEAR	ADDRESS	OCCUPATION
1901 <sup>9</sup>	57 Booth Ave	Merchant
1895 <sup>10</sup>	60 Strange Street	Labourer
1894 <sup>11</sup>	18 Beachell	Labourer

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<sup>8</sup>1851 British Census CD (Devon, Warwick and Norfolk) (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>*The Toronto City Directory 1901* (Toronto: Might Directories Ltd., 1901), p. 737.

<sup>10</sup>*The Toronto City Directory for 1895* (Toronto: Might Directory Co., 1895), p. 1,141.

<sup>11</sup>*The Toronto City Directory for 1894* (Toronto: Might Directory Co., 1894), p. 1,222.

1890 <sup>12</sup>	161 Mill	Labourer
1886 <sup>13</sup>	42 Water	Labourer
1878 <sup>14</sup>	104 Eastern Ave	Labourer
1873 <sup>15</sup>	26 Pine	Labourer
1869–72	No listings	-----
1867/8 <sup>16</sup>	192 Palace	Blacksmith
pre 1867	No listings	-----

The 1867/8 listing screamed with possibility. John claimed to be working as a blacksmith, a trade that is often passed from father to son. Was his father a blacksmith in Devon? Might there be a listing for a blacksmith named Pullman in the 1851 Devon census? A search on the criteria “Pullman” and “blacksmith” yielded one hit. John Pullman, a blacksmith, was enumerated with his wife, Ann, and five children, one of them nine-year-old John. This was the family previously noted living in St. Mary Steps, Exeter. Son John’s parish of birth was given as Heavitree, Devon. The only inconsistency was the name of the father—John rather than the William recorded on the Toronto marriage registration. However, as shown in the census return, John Jr. had a brother 10 years his senior named William.

NAME			AGE	OCCUPATION	BIRTHPLACE
John Pullman	Head	M	41	Blacksmith	Devon Upottery
Ann Pullman	Wife	M	46	-----	“ Shute
William Pullman	Son	U	20	Blacksmith	“ Exeter
Ann Pullman	Dau	U	17	Rag cutter at paper mill	“ Exeter
Elizth. Pullman	Dau	—	14	At home	“ Exeter
Samuel Pullman	Son	—	11	Scholar	“ Exeter
John Pullman	Son	—	9	Scholar	“ Heavitree

*1851 census, Stepcote Hill, St. Mary Steps, Exeter, Devon*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>*The Toronto City Directory for 1890* (Toronto: R.L. Polk & Co., 1890), p. 1,101.

<sup>13</sup>*The Toronto City Directory for 1886* (Toronto: R.L. Polk & Co., 1886), p. 687.

<sup>14</sup>*Toronto Directory, for 1878* (Toronto: Might & Taylor Publishers, 1878), p. 388.

<sup>15</sup>*Toronto Directory for 1873* (Toronto: Chernier, Kirwin & McGown, 1873), p. 236.

<sup>16</sup>*City of Toronto Directory, for 1867–68* (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., 1867), p. 235.

<sup>17</sup>The CD transcription was later verified against a digitized image. See John Pullman household, 1851 census, St. Mary Steps, Exeter, Devon, enumeration district 17a, folio 378, p. 10; digitized image at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) indexed under the surname Pallman.

A likely entry for nine-year-old John was soon found in the British birth index in the fourth quarter of 1841. Several weeks after ordering the birth certificate, it arrived in the mail:

John, born 8 December 1841 in the Parish of Heavitree,  
Devon, to John Pullman, blacksmith, and Ann Froom.<sup>18</sup>

The search for the origins of John Pullman of Toronto had now produced two possible names for his father. When John married in Toronto, his marriage certificate said his father was William. But it now seemed his father might have been named John. Which was it?

Conflicting evidence is a troublesome fact of life in genealogy. All too often one record states one thing and other evidence suggests something quite different. In these cases, genealogists often despair of their ability to determine the correct answer. The problem is complicated by a commonly held view that two or three records stating the same fact are required for a sound conclusion. The better method of resolving contradictions is to carefully analyze and weigh every piece of evidence relevant to the question. Greater weight is given to evidence rated as being more reliable while contradictions between items are resolved by showing that “an item in conflict with the proposed answer is substantially less credible than the item or items that support it.”<sup>19</sup>

In this case, the most likely name of John’s father became clear when the following evidence was considered:

- Family tradition and John’s marriage both say he was born in Devon.
- Records in Canada place John’s date of birth between 1840 and 1845.
- The 4 January 1841 date of birth given for John Pullman of Toronto in the 1901 census is a close albeit not perfect match with the 8 December 1841 birth of John Pullman in Heavitree.
- Both John of Toronto and John born in Heavitree had a mother named Ann.
- Both John of Toronto and John born in Heavitree, later of Stepnote Hill, had a connection to blacksmithing.
- Research has yet to locate any John Pullman or Pulman born in the

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<sup>18</sup>John Pullman birth certificate, 8 December 1841, subdistrict of Heavitree, St. Thomas, Devon, registration BXBZ 996618, issued 13 August 2003, General Register Office, London, England.

<sup>19</sup>Board for Certification of Genealogists, *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual* (Washington: Ancestry Publishing, 2000), p. 13.

early 1840s in Devon—or indeed anywhere in England—to parents named William and Ann.<sup>20</sup>

If John left Stepcote Hill to emigrate to North America, he should at some point disappear from Devon records. The following negative findings were therefore also important:

- John was not with his family in the 1861 census. His mother, Ann, was enumerated at that time as a widow, age 56, living with two of her adult children, Elizabeth and Samuel.<sup>21</sup> Son William and his wife were living nearby.<sup>22</sup>
- No John Pullman born in Heavitree has been found anywhere in England in the censuses of 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 or 1901.
- A search to determine whether John might have died turned up only a death certificate for his father, who died 28 September 1852 at Stepcote Hill, St. Mary's Steps, at the age of 44. He was by occupation a "Smith."<sup>23</sup>

The case was further strengthened by proving that no other John Pullman known to have been born in Devon in the relevant time frame could have been the John Pullman who immigrated to Toronto. For example:

- The seven-year-old John enumerated in the household of Roger and Ann Pullman in Morchard Bishop in 1851 was ruled out because he was enumerated in Morchard Bishop in 1861 through at least 1881.<sup>24</sup>
- The 10-year-old John enumerated with John and Mary Pulman in Ottery St. Mary in 1851 was ruled out because he can be placed in

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<sup>20</sup>Based on a search of the 1851 and 1861 census for England at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>21</sup>Ann Pulman, widow, 1861 census, St. Mary's Steps, Exeter, Devon, p. 2, household 11; FHL microfilm 0542807.

<sup>22</sup>William Pullman, 1861 census, St. Mary's Steps, Exeter, p. 10, household 75.

<sup>23</sup>John Pullman death certificate, 28 September 1852, subdistrict of St. David, Exeter, Devon, registration DYA 926361, issued 13 February 2006, General Register Office, London.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Pullman household, 1861 census, Morchard Bishop, enumeration district 3, folio 20, p. 8. John Thomas Pullman, 1871 census, Morchard Bishop, e.d. 3, folio 25, p. 3. John Thomas Pullman household, 1881 census, Morchard Bishop, Devon, e.d. 3, folio 25, p. 4. Digitized images viewed at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

England as late as 1871.<sup>25</sup>

Further research indicates John Pullman probably left Stepcote Hill in 1858. Online extracts from Exeter police charge books show numerous listings for a Samuel, William and John Pullman in minor trouble with the law.<sup>26</sup> In April 1856, for example, Samuel Pullman, 15, and John Pullman, 13, were arrested for stealing two loaves of bread. A month later, John was imprisoned and whipped on a charge of stealing a window blind prop valued at 6d. In March 1857, John was the witness in a case of theft that was dismissed for lack of evidence. John was identified in both of the last two instances as living on Stepcote Hill. There are no further references to him in the charge books in a search that covered up to 1890.

John's disappearance from the police charge books coincides neatly with the arrival of a 17-year-old John Pullman in New York on the ship *Ellen Austin* from Liverpool on 22 March 1858.<sup>27</sup> A Castle Garden transcription of the passenger manifest gives John's origin as Irish, a discrepancy that will require additional research. However, the age given for John is a good match with John of Stepcote Hill, who would have been 16 at this time.

All considered, the evidence that John Pullman of Toronto was born in Heavitree on 8 December 1841 to John Pullman and Ann Froom is compelling. The only record in conflict with this conclusion—the statement on John's marriage record that his father was William—is outweighed by a significant body of other evidence. Why John's marriage record identifies his father as William remains uncertain. The name may simply have been recorded in error, although other explanations are also possible.

Further research on the Pullman family of Stepcote Hill may produce additional information. Obituaries for John's siblings might mention him as a surviving brother in Toronto. Descendants of the family's Devon branches

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<sup>25</sup>See John Chappel household, 1861 census, Neath, Glamorgan, Wales, e.d. 11, folio 65a, p. 14–15; [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). Note the presence in this household of several Pulmans born in Ottery St. Mary. See also John Pulman household, 1871 census, St. Philip and St. Jacob, Bristol, Gloucestershire, e.d. 32, folio 11, p. 13. The 1861 and 1871 census place John's birth about 1839 or 1840 in Barnstaple, Devon. The 1841 census shows a two-year-old John in a likely Pulman family in Barnstaple. See John Pulman household, 1841 census, Barnstaple, Devon, e.d. 6, folio 4, p. 2. John was likely actually born in 1839. See FreeBMD entry for John Pulman, Barnstaple, third quarter 1839. The 1851 census is an aberration in that John's place of birth appears to read Berum or Barnm. No such place has been found.

<sup>26</sup>Brian Brassett, City of Exeter Police Charge Book Indexes, 1856–1859, GENUKI, Devon County, <http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/Exeter/Police6/index.html>

<sup>27</sup>Castle Garden website, <http://castlegarden.org/>.

might have records that name him. However, all of the evidence gathered to date points strongly in one direction, leaving virtually no doubt that John's marriage registration erroneously identifies his father as William.



*Stepcote Hill, circa 1905*

Making a square nail fit into a round hole turns out to be a task John Pullman could have performed easily. But the blacksmith's tools he would have used are not suitable for a genealogist. Instead, genealogists faced with contradictory evidence must resolve the conflict with careful analysis. Sorting and weighing the facts will eventually allow us to make sense of them. Exhaustive research to uncover all relevant evidence is also essential. John Pullman lived in Toronto for almost 40 years and was listed in numerous city directories, but only once was he listed as a blacksmith. A less extensive search might easily have missed this critical detail.

*Patty McGregor lives in Ottawa and researched her Pullman ancestry with the help of a second cousin, Paul Woodrow, a member of the Kingston Branch. Patty is descended from John Pullman's daughter Sarah Elizabeth. Paul is descended from John's daughter Charlotte Ann.*